

Newsprint: a precious commodity in Sri Lanka

February 22, 2007

Thursday Safar 4, 1428 By Feizal Samath

COLOMBO:

Residents of the embattled northern Sri Lankan town of Jaffna who get to see the Uthayan newspaper often get a copy that is thumb-worn and soiled from having passed through the hands of many avid readers.

Every single copy of this Tamil-language daily published in Jaffna, where the demand and the thirst for news has soared in the past year, is read by more people per copy than the average in most countries. Some 30 to 40 residents read each copy which is passed from house to house down a street and then returned to its original owner, says V. Kanamylnathan, the long-standing editor of the newspaper that is struggling to cope with an unlikely opponent -- an acute shortage of newsprint.

Ever since the government closed the main highway that links the capital Colombo with Jaffna, in August 2006, food and other essentials have been in short supply. Sea and air routes are unreliable and government planes and ships are often targeted by the rebels Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Residents consider newspapers an essential item and form queues outside the nearest newsagent as early as 5 am to grab a copy of the Uthayan or of two other dailies published in Jaffna. When copies run out, the newsagent pins up the last one on a large billboard for free viewing by residents who crowd around to pore over the pages.

Where the daily ran 20,000 to 22,000 copies per day, pre-August 2006, it has now been forced reduce its print run to less than 6,000 copies of a four-page edition.

Its a real struggle, noted Kanamylnathan, who considers the current situation a blot on the so-called freedom of the press. This is indirect control of the media. The other two newspapers, Eeelanadum and the Jaffna edition of the Colombo-based Thinnakural both Tamil-language papers -- face the same plight but were selling in the range of 4,000 to 5,000 copies per day, unlike the hugely successful Uthayan.

Sunanda Deshapriya, convenor of the Free Media Movement (FMM), Sri Lanka's premier media watchdog, says that a few weeks ago a consignment of

newsprint was offloaded from a government ship just before it set off from the eastern port town of Trincomalee with supplies for Jaffna.

Blocking newsprint to the north is a serious violation of media freedom, Deshapriya said referring to the incident. The government defended its action by saying that aircraft parts were found on board the ship raising suspicions.

Deshapriya said several international media organisations raised the newsprint issue with international donors just before a major donor meeting in Sri Lanka late January in the hoping of bringing pressure to bear on the government. But there have been no results as yet.

Northern journalists and newspapers are not the only ones under threat. Media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in its 2007 annual report issued earlier this month, said seven media workers were killed last year across Sri Lanka. That is not the only problem. The Paris-based RSF says Tamil Tiger rebels, who claim discrimination at the hands of Sri Lanka's Sinhala majority and are bent on carving out a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils, threaten those who oppose their political position.

The escalation of the conflict pitting the army against the Tigers (LTTE) forced scores of Tamil journalists into silence or hiding. Most correspondents for Tamil media in the east of the country no longer have their by-line on their reports for fear of reprisals, the report said.

The Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance, representing the interests of Tamil journalists, says that Tamil newspapers have also been banned in eastern towns where a breakaway faction of the LTTE is active.